

# **Rethinking, Protecting and Transmitting the Tangible and Intangible Buddhist Spirit of Leshan Giant Buddha**

Jiaming Luo, Chunjing Zeng  
1<sup>#</sup> Tianxing Road, Leshan City, Sichuan Province  
P. R. China  
614000  
[chunjingzeng@hotmail.com](mailto:chunjingzeng@hotmail.com)

**Abstract.** This paper will rethink the meaning of the ‘spirit of the Giant Buddha’ through two aspects. One is to explain the processes of objectification of that spirit; and, revivifying the genius of the creator through analyzing the historical background, Buddhist culture and the natural environment when it was built. The second is to analyze how people or users maintain and enrich the spirit of the Giant Buddha through their understanding and transformation. It will argue that the spirit of Giant Buddha is composed by numerous tangible and intangible “significant forms”, they gathered and accumulated in specific ways to form the spirit of the Giant Buddha, and give the meaning, value and significance “to place”. The paper will point out current protection and management problems, and explore a holistic and appropriate conservation method. Finally, it will discuss on transmitting this spirit in a modern commercial society.

## **Introduction**

The ‘spirit of place’ refers to the tangible and intangible elements, which give meaning, value and emotion to place. However, the tangible and intangible legacies have been dissociated for a long time due to the lack of recognition of an intangible cultural heritage during the process of protecting the material heritage. Further, the intangible one sometimes was damaged with an emotion of “goodwill” or “unconscious”. The protection of the Leshan Giant Buddha has continuously concentrated on the main body of Buddha statue. Beginning with the construction of the “Daxiang pavilion” to protect the closing style, to the use today of modern scientific and technical methods, the statue is essentially preserved. Yet, since there has been no awareness to further research and protection of the spirit of the Giant Buddha, some elements which constitute that spirit were ignored or even damaged. These included the natural environment of its surroundings, and the intangible cultural heritage (religious activities, and folk-customs). At the same time, in the context of a modern commercial society, when we talk about the transmission and development of the ‘spirit of Giant Buddha’, this also triggers a wide range of controversial issues, such as: what kind of content should be transmitted, and who has the qualifications to transmit and develop? Stemming from these issues, this paper attempts to change the traditional thought which regards protecting the Giant Buddha statue as the only task, and advance the theme of protecting the ‘spirit of Buddha’. Therefore, the

paper will study the concept, meaning and components of the ‘spirit of Buddha’, explore appropriate means and methods for protection and preservation, and discuss the problem of transmission in a modern commercial society.

## **Rethinking the Spirit of Leshan Giant Buddha**

The Leshan Giant Buddha is not an “arbitrary” work of the ancients. It was built on the profound religious and socio-cultural connotations related to the political, economic, social background of the day, and closely linked with the location of its natural environment. Therefore, in order to understanding the spirit of the Leshan Giant Buddha we need to analyze the intangible “content” such as the concept, emotional and psychological things, which were embedded within the tangible “forms”. That is what Heidegger implied by the things which lead the temple to become a temple (Pan Zhichang 2006). The simple classification of tangible and intangible heritage is a necessary distinction between the exterior forms, but not appropriate for the understanding of interior content. Abstract consciousness and embodiment forms, namely between the “content” and the “form” are mutually interdependent, co-existent, and cannot be separated. The form is integrated with content such as concept and feeling, but also content finds a dependent body to demonstrate its intrinsic characteristics. This kind of co-existence was presented by Clive Bell (1914) on the quality of art, "the significant form".

Under this analysis of ‘heritage spirit’, the concept of significant form has a new meaning. The “significance” refers to the content of heritage, the consciousness, idea, emotion and psychology, which the creator and users of the place had hoped to express. The “form” refers to all tangible and intangible things. These forms are instilled (or accumulate) significance, and become ‘significant forms’. All these ‘significant forms’ gather in a specific way and constitute the ‘spirit of heritage’. They together give meaning, value and emotion to their legacy. Similarly, the spirit of the Leshan Giant Buddha is constituted by all significant forms, which are instilled with the genius of the creator, the understanding and enrichment of later users. They give meaning, value and emotion to the Leshan Giant Buddha.

In order to explore where the spirit lies, we need to examine the relationship between the forms and the content, between the thought and the creation, and most importantly identify the elements of ‘significant forms’, which compose the ‘spirit of the Buddha’. From the concept of the ‘spirit of Buddha’, we can see that there are two ways to produce the spirit of place. Firstly, the spirit of Buddha was formed from the creator’s original intention. All things, which bear the intention of creator including the setting and the creation, become a part of the ‘spirit of Buddha’. Secondly, the ‘spirit of Buddha’ should also include the creation of use by later people, who were inspired by the place; it reflects the continuation and development of spirit of the original founders.

### **THE CREATOR’S INTENTION AND ITS “SIGNIFICANT FORMS”**

The Leshan Giant Buddha was built in the Tang Dynasty, which was the most prosperous period of dissemination of Buddhism in China. During that time, the Buddhism was popular, not only believed by ordinary people, but also identified and supported by officials. Under this circumstance, the master monk Haitong was inspired and decided to build the Giant Buddha. So, what was the intention of master Haitong? What was the function and role that the Giant Buddha was to play? Research analysis shows that the construction of the Leshan Giant Buddha had two purposes: the first was to disseminate the theory of Buddha, and show a powerful image of Buddha (Luo Mengding 2002). The second was to meet the desire to reduce the disaster of flooding, to bring hope to the people (Gan Shude 1993).

How did the master Haitong make use of his creative wisdom to objectify such a religious concept and emotionally inject social welfare into the incarnated and visualized Giant Buddha? This process should consider not only the development of Buddhism and reality of sculpting Buddhist statues in that time, but also the special geographic environment and the desire of its social function.

Buddhism in China had become the main ideology since the merging of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and after the Song and Tang Dynasties it reached prosperity. Later, as the product of the Zen sect of China, Buddhism gradually declined. (Ge Zhaoguang 2000). The Leshan Giant Buddha statue was built in the Tang Dynasty, before several places such as Dunhuang, Yungang and Longmen Grottos had constructed some large size Buddha statues.

The first problem Master Haitong faced was to decide which Buddhist bodhisattva he would like to choose. Generally, when people constructed the image of Buddha they might choose Gautama Buddha (Sakyamuni) the founder of Buddhism. However, Master Haitong chose Maitreya Buddha a future Buddha of this world in Buddhist eschatology. Although, during the Tang Dynasty Maitreya Buddha belief was popular and supported by the government, only from dissemination of the Buddhism point of view, it was not enough to explain the reasons of Master Haitong's choice. Especially, it is difficult to explain the special carving style of Buddha: "his left hand was carved into subdued monster fingerprints and put on knee, slightly open his eye, attentively look, stately without anger, dignified and solemn "(Wang Jian 2007). Li Zehou thinks, "Tang Dynasty statues became much more caring about reality in the world, it seems the Buddha liked to approach the world and help people. He no longer was the overriding, unattainable thoughtful God, but the powerful dictate of the world who dominates the world and people can appeal to him." Therefore, the unique style of the Leshan Giant Buddha embodied the special demand of local people, especially for subduing the monster of the river.

Therefore, based on the Buddhist development in that time and social demand of people, Master Haitong chose Maitreya as the sculpting Buddhist bodhisattva, because Maitreya represented the future, brought a concern for the welfare of the people, and would be a successor of the historic Sakyamuni Buddha in the distant future. During the process of carving, Master Haitong designed the sculpture not only in accordance with "scripture of carving statue measurement" which prescribes the Buddha statue's image, proportion and

features; but also take into account the demand of "subduing monster of river", so in addition a normal Maitreya statue, it also showed his power to conquer the disaster of flooding. After the process of objectification, the material form of the Leshan Giant Buddha embodied the creator's idea, and emotion; they became 'significant forms'. When the project was finished, the Giant Buddha became the most representative of the spirit.

Although the creator's idea was ultimately incarnated in the statue of Giant Buddha, similarly, the settings such as the natural environment, the religious activities, are also instilled with the creator's intention, thus, have "significance", and become components of spirit. In accordance with Buddhist discipline, the temple must be built first and then sculpt the Buddha, so the Lingyun temple was established just behind where the Giant Buddha was to be created and acted as the place of origination for the Giant Buddha; local people also call it the Giant Buddha temple. The religious activities of this temple represent the "living part" of Giant Buddha. The open areas which the Giant Buddha faces, also called the "visual corridor", have special Buddhist meaning, such as "Bodhidharma's coming from the west" and "the infinite supernatural power of the Buddha". Thus, for the purpose of the dissemination of Buddhism, Lingyun temple religious activities and the "visual corridor" are "significant forms". All of them belong together as a part of the 'spirit of the Giant Buddha'.

The site of the Giant Buddha was integral to Master Haitong's second purpose: "to subdue the river's monster". Located on the precipice of a cliff, standing before the onrushing river and the converging of three rivers, it presented a terribly threatening natural environment and dangerous atmosphere. Here, this specific area inspired the creator to build Giant Buddha to slow down the river and reduce sinking tragedies. These natural environments have specific meaning and significance to the Giant Buddha, and constitute the spirit of place.

Together with the main body of Giant Buddha statue, the Lingyun temple, the visual corridor, the three-river circumstance, the mountain, the religious activities all these tangible and intangible elements bear the intention of creator and become "significant forms". All these significant forms combine with the Giant statue constituting the 'spirit of the Giant Buddha'.

## INHERITANCE, TRANSFORMATION AND ENRICHMENT THE SPIRIT OF BUDDHA

The spirit of Buddha originates not only from the genius of the original creator, but also from the understanding and transformation of its users. During the process of sculpting, the statue and relevant forms were given specific meaning, and became the components of the 'spirit of Buddha'. After the construction work, the place itself was nurtured and inspired later people or users to further transform and enrich the 'spirit of Buddha'. The creations of later people have changed from the original thought and style, but by so doing, the place took on multiple meanings, which also gave new significance to the 'spirit of Giant Buddha', and left many tangible and intangible legacies for the future. They are all "significant forms", and become components of the 'spirit of Giant

Buddha’.

For 1200 years the Leshan Giant Buddha has never lost its significance as a Buddhist place. However as times changed for the people particularly since the Tang dynasty, religious beliefs became integrated with secular life, Buddhism localized into Chinese Zen, and religion gradually faded, and religious philosophy was replaced by secular philosophy. The secular art that places feeling on mountain and river gradually replaced religious art. Under this transforming process, the content of spirit of the Giant Buddha also was changed. Because the place of the Leshan Giant Buddha possesses a beautiful “Lingyun mountain with natural landscape scenery, the religious sentiments of the Giant Buddha, the attractive Giant Buddha statue and also the genius of creator” (Luo Mengding 2002), are elements that made the place original and now carries the creativity of secular art.

After-carving the Giant Buddha statue, and the construction of a few other religious buildings such as the Lingbao pagodas, and the Wuyou Temple, it no longer became the mainstream for society. After the Tang Dynasty, lots of new buildings, such as “pavilions, platform and storied belvedere” embodied space in new ways became the inspiration for poetry, painting and the relics of poetry and calligraphy of these Secular art and culture became the main understanding and transforming of the ‘Giant Buddha spirit’. Therefore, in Song Dynasty people built the “Jingxiu pavilion”, “Dongpo building”. During the Ming dynasty the “zhaijiu pavilion”, and “jinghe pavilion” were built. Many relics of inscriptions and calligraphies, such as “Dragon pool”, were created there. Even in the 1990s, local people built a “Moro building” to memorialize the famous local modern poet. As a result, although the Buddhism in this place has been maintained and inherited, its focus has been changed to a more humanistic dimension. That is to say, although the local people continue the spirit of Haitong, they also transformed and enriched the Giant Buddha spirit, and instill their age’s understanding, emotion and concept, and eventually left many tangible and intangible “significant forms” to contribute to the ‘spirit of the Giant of Buddha’.

This transformation and enrichment of the Giant Buddha spirit reflect the dynamic and plural characters. From the point of diversity, the spirit of Giant Buddha not only includes strong religious spirit, such as Buddhist beliefs and bringing religious concern for their welfare to the people, but also embodied humanistic spirit when religious concept faded. From the dimensions of a dynamic perspective, it also contains a different understanding and interpretation in each era, reflects their cultural attitude and historical witness. Therefore, the spirits of the Giant Buddha have various forms, and multi-layered meanings. They not only embody the religious spirit and cultural spirit, but also witness the history of national cultural mentalities in different stages.

Therefore, all "significant forms" including the tangible things, such as the Buddha statue, the Lingyun temple, the three rivers, the cliff mountain, the visual corridor, and the later constructed Lingyun pagodas, Wuyou Temple, Dongpo building, and also intangible things, such as Buddhist activities, various human activities, rituals and festivals, relics of poems and calligraphies, all gathered in this specific space, an accumulation of the people’s emotions, ideas and

psychology, constitute the ‘spirit of Giant Buddha’, and give the Giant Buddha meaning, value and significance.

### **Preservation of the Spirit of the Leshan Giant Buddha**

We have just analyzed the concept and components of the spirit of the Giant Buddha, all “significant forms” such as the main body of statue, setting, religious activities, and humanistic relics that are linked together under the theme of ‘Giant Buddha spirit’. They should all be protected. The scope of this protection is significantly different from the traditional concept. These differences not only reflect on preservation alone, but also on contents and objects, on management institutions, measures and technologies.

#### THE PROTECTION OF CONTENTS AND OBJECTS

Because the spirit of Giant Buddha is composed by many tangible and intangible “significant forms”, the protection called for in content and objects is much wider than normally considered.

Firstly, the key component for protecting the spirit of the Buddha is still the Buddha statue. The statue is the main object that reflects the intention of the creator. It is the objectification of the creative genius and the embodiment and incarnation of the place. Up to now, our management agency has emphasized the protection of the statue, and taken several times to do restoration work. This method should not be weakened because of the expansion in the total scope of protection.

Secondly, the plan to protect the ‘spirit of Buddha’ needs pay more attention to the protection of the surrounding environmental elements. In the past we did not realize the importance of ‘spirit protection;’ especially we did not know what elements constituted the ‘spirit of the Giant Buddha’, and we made some mistakes that were never intended. For instance, modern architecture was constructed in the visual field facing the Giant Buddha statue. Twenty years ago, a group of traditional low wooden houses sat there, and these buildings reflected the local traditional historical and cultural background, and left a wider visual corridor for the Giant Buddha, which also highlighted the Buddha’s lofty station and power. These specific natural and artificial environments were installed in keeping with special religious beliefs, such as “Bodhidharma's coming from the west”, and can show the intention of creator. Therefore, these traditional houses and visual corridor are “significant forms”, belonging to the ‘spirit of the Giant Buddha’, and should be protected. Unfortunately, since the 1990s, as modern architecture arose this environment has been damaged, lost its traditional historical and cultural charm, and hurt the creator’s intention of “disseminating Buddhism”.

There is also another example. The dike construction project located in the Leshan Giant Buddha north gate area aims to "improve the environment of the Buddha area, widen tourists’ leisure venues, mitigate tourist congestion, play a

positive role in flood control, control pollution and ensure the safety of Giant Buddha”. Although the construction intention was good, the project did not fully consider what it would change, especially for the change of the river flow line and mountain cliff scene. These environments are essential elements that inspired the creator to build the Giant Buddha. After the project was finished, people found the project did not function as it was designed, and weakened the original atmosphere of its very dangerous environment, which presented the picture of an onrushing river against the mountain cliffs.

Both these cases were caused by traditional protection thought; the agency focused only on the protection and restoration of the statue, and did not realize the importance of setting. Therefore, to protect ‘the spirit of Buddha’, we are required to strengthen the protection of all environmental “significant forms”.

Thirdly, the protection of the ‘spirit of the Giant Buddha’ also includes the protection of intangible cultural elements. Lingyun temple is the birthplace of the Giant Buddha; the religious activities of the temple represent the “living” part of Buddhism; both of them are important components that constitute the ‘spirit of the Giant Buddha’. Therefore, protection of the Lingyun temple and its regional activities should put them in a very important position. Due to historical reasons, Lingyun temple ceased to conduct religious activities. Later, the government was aware of this deficiency and restored the religious activities again.

Finally, the protection of the ‘spirit of Buddha’ should also include preserving the people’s understanding and enrichment that took place in the years following the initial construction. The massive humanities landscape, such as the architecture and the relics of poem and calligraphy, are associated with the place of the Giant Buddha. They were inspired and nourished by the original ‘spirit of Buddha’; they reflect the people’s understanding in various ages. They merge the Giant Buddha spirit with Zeitgeist; eventually they transform and enrich the ‘spirit of Buddha’. From these relics we can clearly observe the evolution of a traditional Chinese cultural context.

## PROTECTION INSTITUTIONS

As discussed before, the ‘spirit of the Giant Buddha’ is endowed with several meanings, which may affect different groups of people, such as local government agencies, Buddhist organization, local residences, and the artistic community. etc. So, the protection of ‘spirit of Buddha’ should come under a participatory management model. That is to say, in addition to the government protection authority, it should also include: Buddhist organization and believers, because they are the inheritors of Buddhism; and local artists, such as the artists of the "Jiazhou painting style", because these artists learned how to explain the feeling of the Giant Buddha’s humanities and art. All of these bodies should take their responsibility in related management and protection sectors. However, in the traditional government administrative system, the Leshan Giant Buddha was regarded as ‘relics’ under national protection in which the government emphasizes protecting the statue, and takes full responsibility. It has a very strong

power in this management system, while the Buddhist organization only serves the activities of Buddhism in the temple. Even in the process of the Giant Buddha restoration projects, there was no Buddhist participation. Some experts think that after the restoration work, the Leshan Giant Buddha lacks "Buddhist spirituality," because "we have never invited the Buddhist art experts to guide the restoration work"(Shui Haimo 2007).

## PROTECTION METHODS

As the 'spirit of Buddha' embodies all "significant forms", not only tangible but also intangible elements, a holistic approach has to be considered. Specifically speaking, planning methods and cultural heritage impact assessments for new development should be applied. The planning can protect the 'spirit' as a whole; heritage impact assessment can carry out a full evaluation for every construction project, which may affect the 'spirit of place'. Although these methods have been mentioned in the Xi'an Declaration, we still need to study further to know what elements we are going to protect, and develop a framework for practical enforcement.

### **Continuing and Transmitting the Spirit of Giant Buddha**

Transmission of the spirit is one of the driving forces of carrying out the protection of 'spirit'. If the 'spirit of place' is not transmitted, it is often abandoned and disappears, therefore transmission is crucial.

## THE CHANGES OF SPIRIT IN CONTENT AND MEDIATORS

As we have discussed earlier, the connotation of the concept of the 'spirit of the Giant Buddha' contains the people's transformation and enrichment. In fact, this understanding and development are part of transmitting the 'spirit of the Giant Buddha'. However, we have seen that this transmission either from spiritual connotation or from mediators was different with the initial situation. Li Zehou said that, "after the Tang Dynasty the ecstasy in the Buddhist religious in China has gradually declined. .... All these, of course, are the changes of Chinese social economical basis and social relationship from medieval time to early modern". More than 1,000 years later, the Buddhist culture has been continued, but Buddhist belief has been diluted. Secularized arts were celebrated. Therefore, transmitting the contents of the 'spirit of the Giant Buddha' have also changed from a religious spirit to a humanistic spirit. At the same time, mediators also changed from the initial master Haitong who represented Buddhist believers to officials, painters, and many well-known poets such as Li Bai, and Su Shi.

## TRANSMITTING THE SPIRIT IN MODERN SOCIETY



With the development of society, both East and West have changed, "replacing religion with aesthetics". Weber believed that the aesthetic for the modern society can provide a certain secular "salvation". It parallels religion, substitutes for religion, and becomes a new 'spiritual rescue' and the second founder. Since the 1980s as the aesthetic seeps into people's daily life, aesthetic emotion becomes more and more popular. For the modern understanding of the 'spirit of Buddha', people pay more attention to the aesthetic view of a statue, and few of them are aware of the perspective of religious understanding. Based on the changes within society, the developer of the Oriental Buddha Park inspired by the Giant Buddha sculpture and art placed more than 3000 excellent Buddhist sculptures in the Park. From the point of transmitting content, international heritage protection experts and most of the professionals in this sector recognize this kind of modern understanding and explanation.

However, because the Oriental Buddha Park is owned by a commercial company, the entity of transmission is not a traditional Buddhist organization or local government. The natural quality of a "profit-driven" commercial company has made local people skeptical about its purpose regarding transmission. Therefore, in the case of the Oriental Buddha Park, the key problem in transmitting heritage spirit in modern society is deciding who owns the 'spirit of heritage? Who should be eligible to become the means of transmission? That is to say, in a modern commercial society who can become the mediator to revitalize the 'spirit of heritage'?

In fact, in our current commercial society, the Buddhist community as the original custodians and inheritors of Buddhism take the main role in maintaining and inheriting the historical tradition of Buddhist culture. This role has been proven since the Tang dynasty. The Government role in modern society is to provide public services. Yet only with the "entrepreneurial spirit" of commercial companies, who have the resources to be innovative, can the task of transformation take place. If there is no innovation for the 'spirit of Giant Buddha', there is no development and enrichment for spirit; it is only the maintenance of its history, no Zeitgeist to reflect the understanding of current society. The integration of 'spirit of Heritage' and entrepreneurship provides us with a historical challenge.

## Conclusion

- Heritage Sites should not be simply classified into tangible and intangible, they are in all forms. When forms are instilled by a creator and later users with the content such as concept, awareness and emotion, they become "significant forms". These "significant forms" gather and accumulate together in a special way, and constitute the 'spirit of place', and give the heritage meaning, value and significance.
- The spirit of the Leshan Giant Buddha was from the spirit of the genius of Master Haitong and the understanding and enrichment of later people. It embodies all the forms of tangible and intangible, incarnates the Giant

Buddha statue, the surrounding environment, Buddhist religious activities, and the subsequent secular building of “pavilion, platform and storied belvedere”, relics of poem and calligraphy. All these “significant forms” gather in this specific place and give meaning, value and significance to place.

- From the spirit protection perspective, all components including tangible and intangible “significant forms” should be brought into a full scope of protection, and protect them in a holistic way. Specifically, the methods of planning and heritage impact assessment are essential, and the participation of the Buddhist community and artists are necessary.
- The ‘spirit of the Leshan Giant Buddha’ has been amplified with social and cultural transformation. It has taken on a plural and dynamic character with multiple meanings. The later creations were inspired from the original spirit which they inherited and also enriched. This work records the understanding of a different era, and reflects Zeitgeist. In our modern social and cultural background, the continuation and enrichment of the ‘spirit of Buddha’ mainly highlights an aesthetic art aspect, and under this circumstance, gives new interpretations and innovations which truly reflect the needs of the age.
- However, in this commercial society, the Buddhist community or government are unlikely but necessary participants in the development of ‘the spirit of Buddha’. As a representation full of innovative character, how entrepreneurial spirit interacts with preservation of the ‘spirit of heritage’ is of vital and ongoing concern.

## REFERENCES

- Clive Bell. Zhou Jinghuan, Ma Zhong Yun translation.1984. *Art*. Beijing: China Artistic Unite Press.
- Gan Shude. 1993. *The summary of history and Culture of Leshan Giant Buddha*. Chengdu: Chengdu Science and Technology University press.
- Ge Zhaoguang. 2000. *History of Chinese Thought*. Shanghai: Fudan University press
- Luo Mengding. 2002. *The world’s concern—Leshan Giant Buddha*. Chengdu: Bashu press.
- Pan Zhichang. 2006. “*The Substitution of Aesthetic Education for Religion*”: *A Hundred Years of Wrong Path in Chinese Aesthetics*. *Academic Monthly* 2006(01): 118-124.
- Wang Jie. 2007. *A new explanation for the enigma of Leshan Giant Buddha*. Beijing: Center for Chinese Studies press.